

SOFTWARE

FAQ

Q What's the benefit of online storage?

A With online storage you've got a simple way of backing up your data, where you don't need to worry about keeping your backup media somewhere safe. Also, you can generally access online storage from anywhere with an internet connection, giving you access to important data no matter where you are.

Broadband connections have far slower upload speeds than download speeds, which makes backing up an entire hard disk impractical. You'll need to pick a small number of important files for backup online to get the best use out of the service.

There are plenty of free services, but they usually have small size limits; BT's Digital Vault, which is reviewed on page 59, has a free 1GB service. So you may want to upgrade to a higher capacity. The cost per gigabyte is higher than with any other type of storage, and if you stop paying your bills you could lose your account and the data stored.

Used properly, though, online storage can provide a convenient and secure way to access your most important files.

David Ludlow

Deputy Editor

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CAKEWALK
Sonar Home Studio 6 XL

★★★★★

£95 inc VAT

Sonar 6 Producer Edition is our top recommendation for music production, but not everyone can afford its price of £329 including VAT. This is where Sonar Home Studio 6 XL steps in. This cut-down package lacks some of the features of Producer Edition, but still includes much more than its price suggests.

Core features are identical to those of Producer Edition, with comprehensive audio and MIDI editing and a flexible mix architecture that allows any audio signal to be routed pretty much anywhere. Recording is at up to 192kHz and 24-bit, and there are no limits to the number of physical inputs and outputs, effects or MIDI tracks that can be used at the same time.

Limitations are imposed elsewhere, and only 64 audio tracks (for recordings or virtual instruments) and 16-bus channels (for effects or submixes) can be used. That said, only the most ambitious recordings are likely to hit these barriers. Other omitted features include track lanes for compiling different takes and V-Vocal for sophisticated vocal tuning. Also, the plug-in bundles are different.

However, you can still get automatic time-stretching of loops to fit the tempo, pitch-shift envelopes, comprehensive mix automation and audio crossfade options, video synchronisation and basic score editing and printing. Compared to most sub-£100 audio software, Sonar Home Studio 6 XL feels anything but home-oriented.

The interface resembles Producer Edition more than previous versions of Home Studio, and packs lots of controls on to the screen at once. This makes it fast for experienced users to operate, although it is likely to intimidate and confuse newcomers. Common tasks such as setting up a virtual instrument or an auxiliary effect are hard to

locate or unnecessarily convoluted, and the new Track Template feature doesn't go far enough in simplifying things. Managing a balance of powerful features, flexible working methods and ease of use is tricky, but Mackie's Tracktion 3, which is reviewed opposite, does a better job.

Sonar Home Studio's effects are another weak area compared to Tracktion 3, with basic sound quality and user control. The compressor's lack of a graphical display means that inexperienced users will struggle to make sense of its controls. The Sonitus EQ plug-in is the exception, providing surgical precision and excellent sound quality via a straightforward interface.

The bundled virtual instruments are far stronger. The standard version of Sonar Home Studio, which costs £65 including VAT, includes a sampler with an excellent collection of presets, a powerful virtual analogue synth and a couple of less-exciting general-purpose synths. Meanwhile, the XL version adds a superior general-purpose synth with an impressive orchestral sound set, a drum machine that specialises in acoustic kits and a limiter effect for adding welly to final mixes. This bundle is just as impressive as the one included with Mackie's £200 Tracktion 3 Ultimate Bundle and it's less hassle to install.

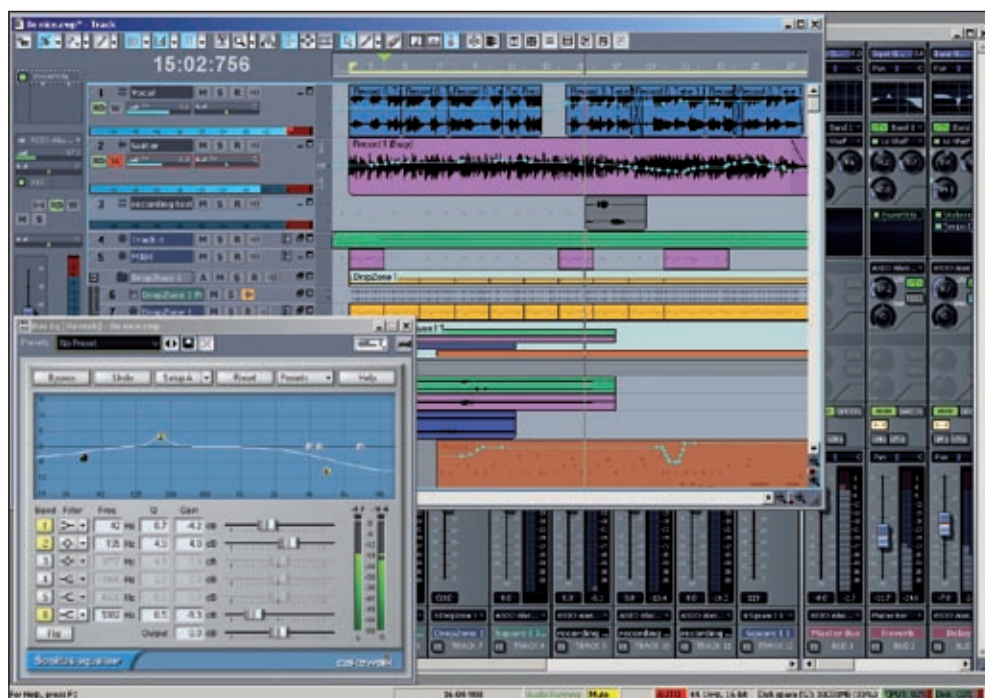
Ideally, we would choose Tracktion 3 Project Bundle's recording interface and Sonar Home Studio 6 XL's bundled instruments. As luck would have it, this is a viable option because Sonar Home Studio 6 XL's key plug-ins use the VST format, so they work in Tracktion, too. If buying both packages isn't realistic then Tracktion 3 is the better product overall, but Sonar Home Studio 6 XL makes more sense if virtual instruments are a priority.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive features
- ✓ Excellent bundle of virtual instruments
- ✗ Steep initial learning curve

MUSIC-PRODUCTION SOFTWARE Windows XP/Vista, 1.3GHz processor, 256MB RAM (2.8GHz, 1GB recommended), 2GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 10-CSHX6.00-30C
SUPPLIER www.etcetera.co.uk
DETAILS www.cakewalk.com



▲ Sonar Home Studio 6 XL's interface is good news for demanding users, but might be intimidating for newcomers

MACKIE

Tracktion 3
Project Bundle★★★★★
£79 inc VATTracktion 3
Ultimate Bundle★★★★★
£199 inc VAT

Professional recording studio equipment can be bewildering for the average musician, so it's hardly surprising that software that emulates professional hardware is often just as baffling. Mackie's Tracktion 3 is one of the few serious music-production applications that plays to the strengths of the computer interface.

The biggest break from tradition is that there is no mixer. Instead, all the components usually found in a hardware (or virtual) mixer are available singularly, and are dropped on to tracks or individual recordings. You build the mixer piece by piece as the need arises. This fundamental simplicity means you are not bamboozled with lots of inactive controls, and it helps you learn the principles of recording one step at a time.

Other than a settings page, the excellent resource manager and pop-up plug-in windows,

everything fits into a single screen, with a properties panel that shows settings for whatever is highlighted. The resolution of the snap-to-grid function changes depending on the zoom setting, enabling copying from bar to bar or fine edits without you having to grapple with grid options. Waveform displays are quick to redraw and the mouse scroll wheel is exploited for fast navigation. Within days, we were working at a speed it took us months to reach with other music software.

Tracktion 3's pricing is also unusual. Most affordable music-production software is either aimed exclusively at home users, with a deficit of precise editing tools, or is a cut-down version of a professionally oriented and priced package, with restricted features in key areas. Tracktion 3 doesn't fit into either category.

The Project Bundle lacks the extra third-party virtual instruments included in the Ultimate Bundle, but otherwise it's just as capable. The number of inputs, outputs, tracks, buses, virtual instruments and effects that can be used is limited only by the hardware and processing power available. Recording is at up to 24-bit and 192kHz, with a 64-bit internal mix architecture. Tracktion 3 can make release-quality recordings without requiring expensive third-party plug-ins.

Version 3 comes with a few new features. There's a new MIDI-editing toolbar, and the quality of time-stretched and pitch-shifted audio is much improved. So too are the MIDI quantise options, with hundreds of groove templates and the

SUMMARY

- ✓ Serious recording software
- ✓ Streamlined, friendly interface
- ✗ Ultimate Bundle a nightmare to activate

MUSIC-PRODUCTION SOFTWARE Windows XP or Mac OS X 10.4.8, 1GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 10GB disk space, DVD drive
SUPPLIER www.dv247.com
DETAILS www.mackie.com



▲ Tracktion 3 offers user-friendly music production, as long as you know your effects

ability to create your own, although you can't extract them from audio loops. Still, upgrade discounts are available for those moving to the Ultimate Bundle, at £119 including VAT.

The Project Bundle has a limited selection of virtual instruments, but the Ultimate Bundle has some superb third-party plug-ins covering acoustic and electronic drums, analogue synthesis and various other instruments, sample loops and a guitar-amp simulator. The quality is excellent, but the multitude of online activations that are necessary is a serious nuisance, and the extra expense is quite high. We'd be inclined to stick with the Project Bundle and buy third-party plug-ins as required, or even Cakewalk Sonar Home Studio XL (reviewed opposite) just to pillage its virtual instrument collection.

Tracktion 3 is one of the friendliest music-production applications, though you must know your effects to use it at its best. Its friendliness doesn't come at the expense of power, and the quality of the effects makes this one of the best packages at any price.

Ben Pitt

Also consider...

OPENOFFICE

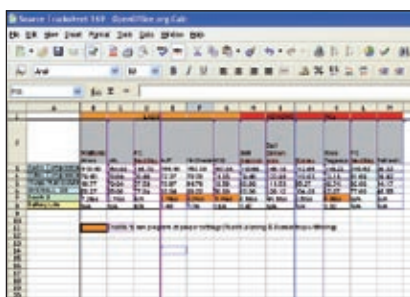
OpenOffice.org 2.1

★★★★★
Free

OpenOffice is a completely free office suite, and it's brilliant. It might feel a little old-fashioned next to Microsoft Office's flashy features, but it has a number of excellent applications including the word processor, spreadsheet, database and presentation program. It's an essential piece of software for any PC owner.

OFFICE SUITE Requires Windows 98 or later, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 800MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.openoffice.org
DETAILS www.openoffice.org

✓ Excellent office suite; good document-checking features
✗ Macro function kept crashing FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



ADOBE

Creative Suite 3
Design Premium★★★★★
£1,488 inc VAT

Adobe's Creative Suite has quickly become the best bundle of creative software. With its new Design Premium, it's got even better. The bundle includes InDesign, Photoshop Extended, Illustrator, Acrobat Professional, Flash Pro and Dreamweaver – everything you need, whether you're creating work for print or the web.

CREATIVE SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2/Vista, 512MB RAM PRODUCT CODE 19500009
SUPPLIER www.zomp.net DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk
✓ Excellent value; tight integration between applications
FULL REVIEW Aug 2007



ACRONIS

True Image 10 Home

★★★★★
£15 inc VAT

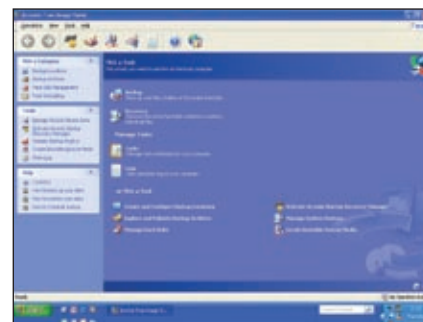
PRICE CUT!



True Image 10 from Acronis makes a complete copy of your PC's hard disk, operating system and all, so you can restore it to a working state easily.

It can make backups of folders and emails and even back up the settings of applications, providing you with everything you need to make sure your data is protected at all times.

IMAGING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 or later, 133MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE AT110 SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com
DETAILS www.acronis.com ✓ Easy to use ✗ Some features not that useful FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



SIBELIUS SOFTWARE

Sibelius 5

★★★★★

£419 inc VAT



If you need to produce musical scores and you care about their presentation, Sibelius is the software to use. It produces attractive scores with unsurpassed flexibility to accommodate a huge range of notation and performance techniques. It can be daunting on first use, but the excellent manuals and video tutorials quickly reveal an extremely polished, friendly interface with lots of time-saving features.

Sibelius Software had pretty much nailed its core notation tools in version 3. Version 4, which we reviewed in *What's New: Software, Shopper* December 2005, focused on ancillary features such as part extraction, video support and teaching aids. Version 5 is in a similar vein.

The most impressive new features are Native Instruments' Kontakt 2 virtual instrument and a 3GB sample library for playback of scores.

Previous versions provided similar, but more basic playback. A maximum of eight simultaneous instruments meant that different parts of large scores had to share the same sound (all woodwind on a clarinet, for example). In version 5, sound quality is greatly improved, and Kontakt 2's

16-instrument limitation can be circumvented simply by loading more than one instance of it. Using multiple instances increases the load on the computer, but our Core 2 Duo PC with 1GB of RAM comfortably managed to play a complex orchestral score with 31 parts using two Kontakt 2 players. Orchestral sounds are very well catered for, and expansion libraries are available for world music, choral and rock and pop instruments.

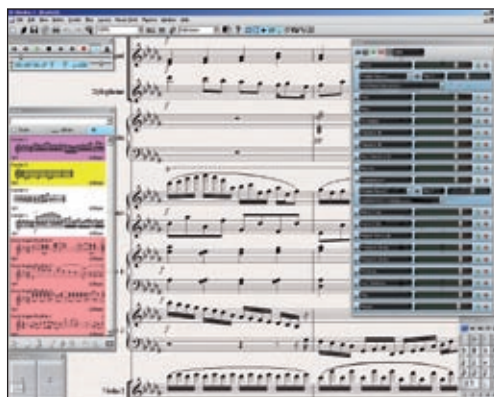
Meanwhile, support for VST plug-ins means you can substitute any specific sounds with other VST instruments, and there are sophisticated options for instrument playback preferences.

The other new features are simpler, but arguably no less important. The Ideas Hub is a powerful clipboard-cum-sketchpad for musical motifs and is the ideal place to store ideas that don't yet have a home in the score itself. Panorama is a new way of viewing scores without worrying about page layouts. It presents scores as an extremely wide page and makes note input easier. We're particularly pleased that bar numbers can take repeat marks into account, which is not standard

SUMMARY

- ✓ Highly customisable score creation
- ✓ Vastly improved audio playback
- ✗ Needs manual layout adjustment

MUSIC-NOTATION SOFTWARE Windows XP (SP2)/Vista or Mac OS X 10.4, 512MB RAM, 350MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE M3C49020
SUPPLIER www.mannsmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.sibelius.com



▲ Sibelius's new Ideas Hub and improved audio playback bolster its already excellent scoring tools

practice but a sensible choice for pop music arrangements. A new Paste as Cue command generates correctly labelled and resized notes into individual parts to help performers follow other instruments in a score. These are not dynamically linked to the original notes to reflect further changes, but a Check Cues option locates differences for manual correction.

There is still some room for improvement. Automatic formatting of scores is generally excellent on the horizontal axis, widening bars with lots of notes or to make room for lyrics, but is less reliable on the vertical axis, where dynamics markings can clash with low notes, for example. However, it's easy to fix these issues, and, in general, Sibelius does a remarkable job of balancing flexibility with sensible default settings. Its improved playback quality means there's little reason to consider using anything else.

Ben Pitt

Also consider...

ADOBE Photoshop Lightroom 1.0

★★★★★

£133 inc VAT



Adobe's Lightroom is everything a digital camera enthusiast could want. It helps manage your images, process RAW files, correct colour, retouch and export to a range of media. It's brilliant to use and, although designed for professional photographers, a great choice for anyone with an expensive camera.

PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 768MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 19250102 SUPPLIER uk.insight.com
DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk ✓ Powerful photo manipulation
✗ Basic noise reduction and sharpening
FULL REVIEW Jul 2007



ROXIO Easy Media Creator 9 Suite

★★★★★

£33 inc VAT



This suite comes with all the media-editing tools you'll ever need. Its greatest strengths are its tight integration between all the modules and its friendly, task-oriented interface. With capable editing tools, it's great value and the best media suite you can buy, although there's not enough difference to warrant upgrading.

MEDIA SUITE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 227000UK
SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com DETAILS www.scan.co.uk
✓ Excellent media-editing tools ✗ Little reason to upgrade from Creator 8
FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



STEGANOS AntiVirus 2007

★★★★★

£20 inc VAT



Steganos AntiVirus uses software from Kaspersky, so you get the best anti-virus protection money can buy for a lot less money. In our recent Labs test (*Shopper* April 2007), it beat every other anti-virus application hands down. For Windows Vista, you'll have to buy Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6, as Steganos doesn't currently support Vista.

ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 or later, 300MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.steganos.co.uk DETAILS www.steganos.co.uk
✓ Powerful protection against viruses ✗ Not compatible with Windows Vista
FULL REVIEW Apr 2007





▲ Cakewalk's Studio Instruments is a well-executed program with some fun animations

CAKEWALK Studio Instruments

★★★★★
£30 inc VAT

Today's synthesizer sounds are more likely to come from a software plug-in than a sound card or hardware keyboard. The best cost hundreds if not thousands of pounds, but there are lots of cheap and free alternatives. These tend to be outlandish, but Cakewalk's Studio Instruments is affordable and not particularly weird.

It comprises four distinct plug-ins covering acoustic drums, bass guitar, electric piano and strings. Each runs as a standalone application, a VST plug-in (compatible with most recording software) or an Audio Units plug-in (running on a Mac). As with any virtual instrument, you'll need a MIDI keyboard and a sound card with ASIO drivers, unless you're happy to compose by drawing notes with the mouse.

Each plug-in draws on a set of samples to emulate the instrument in question. Cakewalk's extensive experience in this field ensures that quality is excellent. There are a few exceptions: playing a scale on the electric piano reveals some slightly awkward changes in tone on certain notes, and it's odd that the string sounds draw on violin, cello and double bass but not viola samples. Still, the emulations are convincing, with realistic changes in tone at different playing volumes. Cute animations of swaying bows and rattling drums ensure that first encounters are particularly enjoyable.

Some variation is available for each instrument, but it's mostly limited to different effects settings, as each one is based on a single set of samples. This might frustrate some people, but the straightforward approach did encourage us to get on with writing music rather than browsing through stacks of presets.

Studio Instruments is an excellent concept, particularly for songwriters and guitarists in need of a virtual backing band. It's well executed and keenly priced, and only the lack of an acoustic piano instrument stops it getting five stars.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great for creating backing tracks
- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✗ No acoustic piano sounds

VIRTUAL INSTRUMENT BUNDLE Requires Windows XP/Vista or Mac OS X 10.4.9, 1.3GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 500MB disk space
PRODUCT CODE 10-CWS11.00-30E
SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.cakewalk.com



▲ The share tool enables Digital Vault to double as a photo- or video-sharing base

BT Digital Vault

★★★★★
Basic 1GB free; Premium with 20GB and Auto Backup £4.99 per month inc VAT

Online storage is a useful way to protect your files against local hardware failure. BT's Digital Vault promises storage and more besides, throwing file sharing and an automated backup tool into the mix.

No special software is required to access the Digital Vault. It enables access to your files from any internet-connected computer by using a web browser. From the Digital Vault homepage, there is direct access to Upload and Share tools. Upload takes the form of a drag-and-drop dialog box, which makes uploading lots of files and folders quick and efficient.

The share tool lets Digital Vault double as a photo- or video-sharing base. You can build photo or video albums from your uploaded files and send viewing invitations to friends, who can then view a slideshow of the album or download the original files. A similar tool lets you compile folders of files that can be shared for collaborative work among colleagues.

It's easy to navigate through the various tools, but keeping track of files can be harder. The interface doesn't visually distinguish between folders and files, and you can't have subfolders. This makes navigation and organisation difficult. Together with a slow interface response, it can be frustrating to use.

The automated backup tool is available only with the paid-for service (or if you are a BT broadband customer). It lets you select files or folders for regular backup. Once initiated, the backup application ensures that any changes to your protected files and folders are saved to the Digital Vault without further intervention.

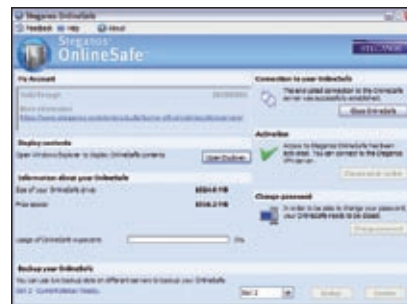
The free version does a good job, and the photo and video albums are a nice touch. However, the slow interface and poor file organisation are problems, making the paid-for version's £60 annual fee seem expensive.

David McKinnon

SUMMARY

- ✓ Free basic online storage
- ✗ Needlessly confusing interface
- ✗ Can be slow to access

ONLINE BACKUP Requires Windows 2000 or later, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, broadband connection
SUPPLIER <http://digitalvault.bt.com>
DETAILS <http://digitalvault.bt.com>



▲ When you log on, your online storage is mounted as a network drive on your computer

STEGANOS OnlineSafe

★★★★★
From £3.95 inc VAT per month

While there are plenty of online storage services, Steganos OnlineSafe aims to be the most secure. Rather than using your web browser for access, OnlineSafe installs its own application that connects to your online storage using an SSL-encrypted VPN. Stored data is encrypted using 256-bit AES encryption, so only you can view it.

By launching the application and logging on using your password, your online storage is mounted as a network drive on your computer. It can then be used like a local hard disk; you even format it before you first use it. There are no scheduling tools to make regular backups to your safe, so you will need to remember to copy important files regularly or invest in extra software. The network drive is unmounted and the network connection closed by logging off from the main OnlineSafe application window.

To guarantee data integrity, OnlineSafe lets you back up your safe to two different servers, called slots. These slots have to be manually activated, but give you peace of mind. Even if Steganos's server malfunctions, your data will remain safe. In the event of your PC having a problem, however, retrieving data can be complex. The application software must be downloaded and installed from the Steganos website, and the activation code and password entered before you can gain access.

The basic package costs £3.95 a month for 500MB of storage, but you can also pay £40 a year (a saving of around £17) for the same amount. Steganos also offers 1GB safes for £70 a year and 10GB for £170 a year. This does make it expensive compared to the competition (BT's Digital Vault, left, costs £60 for 20GB of storage), so it's not ideal for general use. Still, if you have data such as scans of insurance documents, deeds or receipts, where security is the most important thing, this program is a good choice.

David McKinnon

SUMMARY

- ✓ Seamless integration with Windows
- ✓ Very secure
- ✗ Expensive

ONLINE STORAGE Requires Windows 2000 or later, 128MB RAM, Pentium or equivalent processor, Internet Explorer 5.0 or later
SUPPLIER www.steganos.com
DETAILS www.steganos.com